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Panel: Writing in Dialogue

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On the Symbolic Action and the Symbolic Association

Sulkhan Zhordania

Goethe, reflecting upon the genius of Shakespeare, defined the symbol as a significant and important action indicating another, more important one. To illustrate his point, he retold a scene in which the son and heir takes a crown lying by the side of the mortally ill, dozing king, puts it on and majestically withdraws. For Goethe, symbolic actions were the climax of art, scattered like precious stones among commonplace episodes.

Everything that is in the air when great events come true, that, at fearful moments, lurks in our hearts or timorously locks itself and waits for an opportunity in our souls, through the symbol, naturally comes out into the open, and we learn the truth about life and we do not know how. The symbol tells us about things, which, had we kept to the beaten tracks of reason and intellect, we would have never reached. Consider the following:

“They deserved to die. He had a right to kill them. He felt in his arms and in his fingers, and to the core of his heart, the sweet exertion of strangling, horrible and sweet, an orgiastic rapture of inflicting death. He was sweating heavily, his shirt wet and cold under his arms. In his mouth came a taste of copper, a metabolic poison, a flat but deadly flavor...He tried to muffle the sound of his breathing, opening his mouth. In the rushing water with floating toys, his daughter’s little body shown. His child! He melted with tenderness for her... She raised her face to speak to someone he could not see... Then a hand reached forward and shut off the water---a man’s hand. It was Gersbach! He was going to bathe his daughter. Gersbach!

His face was all heaviness, sexual meat. Looking down his open shirt front, Herzog saw the hair-covered heavy soft flesh of Gersbach’s breast. His chin was thick and like a stone axe a brutal weapon...The hated traits were all there.

But see how he was with June, scooping the water on her playfully, kindly. Moses might have killed him now. His left hand touched the gun, enclosed in the roll of roubles...There were two bullets in the chamber...But they would stay there. Herzog clearly recognized that. Very softly he stepped down from his perch, and passed without sound through the yard again. He saw his child in the kitchen, looking up at Mady, asking for something, and he edged through the gate into the alley. Firing the pistol was nothing but a thought.”

In a piece of fiction, great or small, down to the smallest one, in the final analysis, everything comes to the idea. It is the idea of forgiveness that strikes my imagination in the cited passage. Saul Bellow incarnates this idea in a number of wonderful symbolic actions which add to his style a very specific aroma. The central figure of his novel, Moshe Herzog, does not kill his sworn enemy only because the scoundrel happens to be kind and playful to his daughter at a particular moment. This is a surprise that stirs sympathy in me. The whole episode, which could be easily arranged for stage, epitomizes Goethe’s idea about the symbolic action, though here the significant action indicates not

another action but the innate predisposition of the character towards forgiveness and tolerance. This idea, in a more subtle and sophisticated way, is conveyed in the opening pages of the book:

“All this happened on a bright, keen day. He had been in the back yard putting in storm windows. The first frost had already caught the tomatoes. The grass was dense and soft, with that peculiar beauty it gains when the cold days come and the gossamers lie on it in the morning. The dew is thick and lasting. The tomato vines had blackened and the red globes had burst. He had seen Madelaine at the back window upstairs, putting June down for her nap, and later he heard the bath being run. Now she was calling from the kitchen door. A gust from the lake made the framed glass tremble in Herzog’s arms. He propped it carefully against the porch and took off his canvas gloves but not his beret, as though he sensed that he would immediately go on a trip.”

There are very few original stories left to tell. The difference is how one chooses to tell them. Saul Bellow tells about love and hatred between a husband and wife with freshness and originality in subject angle and style, teaches us a new way to view the world, illuminates the various layers of characters and their situations, surprises us with more truth than we thought we had a right to expect. The seemingly insignificant moment in the cited passage, “Herzog’s taking off his canvas gloves but not his beret,” specified by the seemingly matter-of-fact comparison, “as though he sensed that he would immediately go on a trip,” imparts to the whole episode a unique feeling of the beauty of obedience and non-resistance to evil. It is obvious that this kind of the symbol differs from the one discussed by Goethe. What Goethe had in mind was a theatrical metaphor, and what we are considering now is a combination of action and association. It seems rather easy to adapt for the stage a symbolic action, but is it as easy to convey the idea of ‘as though’ to the theatrical audience?

“He turned to face the vast grey court building. Dust swirled on the broad stairway, the stone was worn. Going up, Herzog found a bouquet of violets, dropped from the hand of a woman, perhaps a bride. Little perfume remained in them, but they made him remember Massachussets-Ludeyville. By now the peonies were wide-open, the mock-orange bushes fragrant. Madelaine sprayed the lavatory with syringe deodorant. These violets smelled to him like female tears. He gave them burial in a trashcan, hoping they had not dropped from a disappointed hand.”

What arrests my immediate attention here is the association of the smell of violates with the smell of tears, for tears have no smell whatsoever. I call this simile reckless for specifying an ordinary thing to a non-existent, imaginary one. And strange though it may seem, that is exactly why I like it. It is absolutely unpredictable and contains a grain of enigma, stirs a queer feeling in me, affords me an inexplicable aesthetic delight. The only thing that this image has in common with the symbolic action considered by Goethe is that both imply something more important, something directly connected with the main idea of the work of art. Otherwise they are different: Goethe’s symbol is completely reduced to the action, while Saul Bellows image tells me through a unique association that however cheated and humiliated an individual may be he will still remain God fearing and forgiving if the element of love is stronger in him than the element of hatred.

The highest criterion for assessing fiction is its entertainment value. It must first be enjoyable reading. To stand out, it must be thought provoking, strongly emotive and

cleverly plotted. Contemporary readers look for exceptional voice, interesting topics and playfulness with language. No sensitive reader is satisfied with a predictable, trite ending to the story. And this is how Saul Bellow winds up his novel.

“Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell, really seemed to be passing, really going. He set down his hat, with the roses and day lilies, on the half painted piano, and went into the study, carrying the wine bottles in one hand like a pair of Indian clubs. Walking over notes and papers, he lay down on his Recamier couch. As he stretched out, he took a long breath, and then he lay, looking at the mesh of the screen, pulled loose by the vines, and listening to the steady scratching of Ms. Tuttle’s broom. He wanted to tell her to sprinkle the floor. She was raising too much dust. In a few minutes he would call down to her, “Damp it down, Ms. Tuttle. There is water in the sink.” But not just yet. At this time he had no message for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word.”

What a wonderful ending, emotional, subtly optimistic. Saul Bellow leaves his hero alone in the same social environment in which he first introduced him to his readers, and in which the man condemned himself as a good for nothing son, father, brother, friend and citizen. In the end, Moshe Herzog has nothing to say to anyone, for he has overcome himself, has awakened. Without any important action or startling trope, the cited excerpt has the energy of a powerful symbol through its ‘non-action’, passivity and the relation with the global context of the novel. The man, whose second divorce has brought him to the verge of madness (he started writing letters to the dead and the living, to the great men of the past and of the present, to the women he loved, and to his friends, neighbors, colleagues etc. and etc., continuously, day and night, at any convenient or inconvenient moment) gets rid of the words crowding against him, crushing his privacy. So it seems.

Away from his family and kin, he has a critical view of his course of life, but is unusually tolerant of those who have robbed him of his peace of mind. To some this may seem rather affected and melodramatic. Not so with me. I believe that such a perfectly sculptured character must have had a protagonist in Saul Bellow’s homeland. As the ideal of the Madonna was available for medieval Italian artists, for they could see her image in the beautiful women of their country, so must the ideal of Moshe Herzog be available for Saul Bellow among his contemporaries. I have grown fond of this ideal. I have acknowledged it both ethically and aesthetically. Moshe Herzog’s monumental figure is made of many components. It reminds me of the majestic flow of the river across land towards the ocean. The magnificent yet deceptive, constantly changing river carries many tributes from its tributaries, but I, though aware of the loot, can point at none when I fix my gaze on its wide open space.